

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY IN AMERICA
Department of Education
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THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THEOSOPHY

A COURSE FOR GROUP STUDY

on

THE THREE FUNDAMENTAL PROPOSITIONS
of
THE SECRET DOCTRINE

NOTES FOR THE GROUP LEADER

(Issued by The Theosophical Society in England)

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF THEOSOPHY

NOTES FOR THE GROUP LEADER

N.B. These Notes are for the use of any member of the Group who is acting as Leader, whether permanently or for a single occasion.

The function of the Group Leader is to take general responsibility for the study sessions, to ensure that the necessary material is available at each meeting, to control the stopping and starting of the tape and, aided by these Notes, to provide opportunity for discussion or other appropriate activity.

The Group Leader is not required to answer questions or give instruction. He should encourage all members to participate in the work, according to their ability and willingness to do so.

HOW TO USE THE LEADER'S NOTES

The Leader needs to make himself familiar with the general procedure, with the lay-out of the Notes, and with those sections of the Notes that are likely to be used during a particular session. This will need to be done in advance of the study meeting. The Notes required at each meeting will not usually cover more than two pages.

The Notes are arranged as follows:

- a) The numbered sections indicate natural divisions in the subject matter of the tape. The headings of these sections show the gist of the study material that follows, and the same arrangement is adopted in the Students' Notes.
- b) The symbol *** is used to advise that the tape should be stopped immediately after hearing the words given thus: BLOCK CAPITALS WITH BROKEN UNDERSCORING. At each of these stopping points, some suggestions are given for the kind of work that could be done by the group. Additional pauses may be introduced at the request of members or at the Leader's discretion.

At all times it is to be observed that the Notes are intended to guide, not to control, the work of the Group. They may be read out to the Group if this is helpful.

HOW TO USE THE TAPE

The tape is a substitute for a study leader. The spoken sections are intentionally short, and the stopping points should be adhered to in order to allow for Group participation. Sections of tape may of course be played over more than once, and it will probably be found helpful to begin each meeting with a replay of the last section studied, especially where there is an interval of more than one week between meetings.

LEADER'S NOTES

1. Introduction to the Course.

*** ... WHAT YOU THINK THEOSOPHY IS.

- a) Members now write their own definitions. 3 to 5 minutes should be sufficient.
- b) Invite members to share their definitions with the Group by reading them out in turn. If some are unwilling to do this, they should on no account be pressed to do so.
- c) General discussion on the definitions of Theosophy and on the preceding subject matter (the contents of the Lodge syllabus) may follow.

2. Definitions of Theosophy.

Seven quotations are given. The first one ends with the words:

*** ... AND IS THEREFORE GOD-WISDOM, DIVINE WISDOM.

Now ask members if they would like a pause after each definition for discussion or to make notes. If so, follow the quotations given below and stop the tape accordingly. Otherwise, continue to the end, stopping at:

*** ... IT IS ALTRUISM.

- a) Discussion of the definitions. Give their sources, and read them out or play them again as desired.
- b) Invite members to look for other definitions and explanatory statements for discussion at a subsequent meeting. The Group might like to make a collection of all such statements; a collection of this kind could itself form the basis of a study session.
- c) This may be a suitable moment to look again at the Lodge syllabus in the light of the definitions discussed.

ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTATIONS (adapted)

1. Theosophy (Manual): A. Besant.
Theosophy is derived from two Greek words - Theos, God: Sophia, Wisdom - and is therefore God-Wisdom, Divine Wisdom.
2. Theosophical Glossary: H. P. Blavatsky.
Theosophia (Greek). Wisdom-Religion, or "Divine Wisdom". The substratum and basis of all the world religions and philosophies, taught and practised by a few elect ever since man became a thinking being.

3. Hastings' Dictionary of Religion and Ethics:
Theosophy has characteristics which relate it both to religion and to philosophy. It attempts to determine man's place in the universe and to solve the riddles of life and death.
4. Theosophy: Rudolph Steiner.
Theosophy is the supersensible knowledge of the world and of the destination of man.
5. Pears Cyclopaedia (1968-9):
Theosophy is a religious movement founded by Madame Blavatsky in 1875.
6. Theosophy - What's it all about? Geoffrey A. Farthing.
Theosophy treats of the whole of life, as a whole. Goodness and Beauty are of its nature; Devotion and Mysticism are its ways.
7. Practical Occultism: H. P. Blavatsky.
True Occultism or Theosophy is the 'Great Renunciation of SELF', unconditionally and absolutely, in thought as in action. It is ALTRUISM.

3. Madame Blavatsky on How to Study Theosophy.

*** ... LET US STOP TO READ THE FOREWORD NOW.

- a) The Foreword may be read by the Leader or by different members in turn. In view of its importance, it would be worth while to read it a second time, omitting the first paragraph as this is simply explanatory of the circumstances in which the notes were originally made.
- b) Questions and discussion on the Foreword.

4. The Three Fundamental Propositions:

*** ... A TRUTH OFFERED FOR CONSIDERATION.

Discussion.

*** ... ON THE PERUSAL OF THE WORK ITSELF.

- a) Have The Secret Doctrine open at page 79. Give the members an opportunity to see where the Three Propositions occur in the text: page 79 (Proposition I) and page 82 (Propositions II and III). They will be interested to see the facsimile of the MSS on the facing page, showing one version of the Propositions.

- b) The dictionary: one can learn a great deal about words, even when they seem familiar, by studying their meanings and derivation as given in a good dictionary. One member might like to make it his responsibility to have charge of the dictionary and look up words that present difficulty.

5. The First Proposition: Preliminary reading.

*** ... NOW TO OUR READING.

The three paragraphs should now be read, quite slowly, but without stopping for much discussion at this stage. The purpose of this reading is simply to give familiarity with the wording, and at the same time to let members feel something of the grandeur of the phrases in which the basic truths are expressed. A second reading is almost essential, but a third may be deferred until the beginning of the next meeting, or be taken as the conclusion of this meeting, without further discussion.

Whenever possible, all members should be invited to take turns in reading, but the language is not easy and some may prefer not to read aloud. Their contribution lies in attentive listening.

Although discussion is not advocated at this stage, spontaneous discussion and questions should always be allowed unless there is some good reason for limiting them. Members of a study group must never feel that they are not free to express their thoughts.

6. First Proposition: First paragraph.

*** ... IS NOT STANDING IN OUR WAY.

Here the work to be done is to go carefully through all the principal words of the first paragraph, trying to express in simpler language both the individual words and the phrases in which they occur. The Group may find it helpful to think of it in this way: suppose that a visitor from another country, with only a limited knowledge of English, were present, how could the main ideas contained in this paragraph be put to him? To do this successfully, one must first find easier, more common words to replace those in the book, and then one must break down the long, complex sentences into short, simple statements.

This exercise could be done first individually, or in groups of two or three working together, afterwards pooling the different efforts in a general discussion. If the study group is small, it may be preferred to work all together from the beginning. In either case, a written version needs to be made by one or all of the

members, as the next section of the tape will go over the same ground. It is not enough to discuss meanings; writing is here very important.

7. First Proposition: First paragraph: A study of meaning.

On the tape, the words and phrases of the First Proposition are discussed one at a time. The following stopping points will allow the Group to discuss each of the main ideas separately, but a second hearing of the whole passage at the end may restore the wholeness of the proposition.

*** ... THAT FIRST SMALL WORD, THE SINGULAR ARTICLE, AN.

*** . THING OR PERSON OR PLACE. IT IS EVERYWHERE.

*** ... THAT IS ALL THAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT IT.

*** ... THE ADDITIONAL NOTES ON THIS SECTION.

The Students' Notes contain extracts and references which it may be thought advisable to study at home and to discuss at a subsequent meeting. If the extracts are read aloud, the reading should be carefully practised so that the meaning is clearly expressed and the beauty of language effectively communicated.

8. First Proposition: First paragraph: A meditation.

N.B. Mention to the Group that the next section ends with a request for a momentary silence. On hearing the words:

*** ... UNTHINKABLE AND UNSPEAKABLE.

just stop the tape and say nothing. After one or two minutes - not more - suggest continuing with the next section.

Consider together whether it might be useful in future to begin each meeting with a reading of the first paragraph of the First Fundamental Proposition (omitting the words 'in the words of the Mandukya'), following this with a short silence. However, the idea should be adopted only if generally acceptable.

9. The Importance of the First Proposition.

The section concludes with a short passage from the Rig Veda, ending with the words 'or perchance even He knows not'. This passage is read twice. Do not stop the tape until the words are heard for the second time.

*** ... OR PERCHANCE EVEN HE KNOWS NOT.

- a) Some discussion on the questions raised, on the origin of good and evil, the purpose of manifestation, and so on, may be thought appropriate. However, these are enormous questions, and to study them in any depth would occupy not only several meetings but several life-times. What is important for the moment is to recognize some of the problems that may confront us if, following the theosophical tradition, we affirm the oneness not only of all humanity and all life but of all that is, was or ever will be. The discussion therefore should not aim to solve these problems so much as to ventilate them; the length of time given to it must be determined by the members, but it would seem inadvisable to allow it to be prolonged for more than one meeting, unless accompanied by study of the issues involved.
- b) The passage from the Rig Veda (S.D. Vol.I, p.90) is inspiring, but the language and sentence-structure are not easy. If it is thought desirable to read it in its entirety, the member (or members) who are to read it aloud will need to practise the reading thoroughly. An unprepared reading is likely to destroy the beauty of the passage and convey little meaning.

10. First Proposition: Second paragraph.

*** ... A GOOD PREPARATION FOR STUDYING IT IN DETAIL.

- a) Reading of the second paragraph.
 - b) Proceed to study the paragraph in two steps, as was done for the previous one, i.e. first a study of vocabulary, and then, when the words are adequately understood, an attempt to re-state the ideas in a number of short, simple sentences that would convey the meaning of each term or phrase to a visitor with a limited command of English.
11. Naming the Ineffable.

*** ... ABSOLUTE ABSTRACT MOTION OR THE GREAT BREATH.

Brief discussion, if desired, on the use - or uselessness - of applying names to that which is beyond human understanding.

12. The Attitude of the Theosophical Student.

*** ... APPLY EQUALLY TO ALL THEOSOPHICAL STUDY.

Discuss H.P.B.'s teaching on the attitude to be adopted in theosophical study. The last paragraph on page 7, beginning 'It is worse than useless ...' is relevant to this discussion, and could profitably be read at this point.

If any members of the Group are able to study Dr. Besant's lecture, mentioned in the Students' Notes, the main points may be shared in some way during the discussion of attitude.

13. First Proposition: Third paragraph.

*** ... AWAKEN SOME SORT OF RESPONSE IN US.

- a) Discuss the paragraph if desired.
- b) Read the whole of the First Proposition once more, in preparation for the next section, which will include a revision of the ground covered so far.

14. First Proposition: Conclusion and Revision: Four Basic Ideas.

*** ... AND ALL IT IMPLIES FOR US.

- a) Read paragraph a) on page 8, down to the bottom of the page. A second reading is desirable.
- b) Discuss this paragraph, relating it to the three paragraphs of the First Fundamental Proposition. Pay particular attention to H.P.B.'s explanation of the meaning of UNITY.
- c) As a conclusion to the discussion, suggest that the Group spend a few moments trying to realize the significance of the statement: ALL EXISTENCE IS ONE THING.

15. Second Proposition: First paragraph.

*** ... BEFORE PROCEEDING WITH THE TAPE.

Refer to the Students' Notes.

16. Second Proposition: An Illustration from The Key to Theosophy.

*** ... THE NIGHTS AND DAYS OF THE UNIVERSE.

Refer to the Students' Notes. It will be helpful to read and study together the passage from the Key.

17. Second Proposition: Second paragraph.

*** ... DAY AND NIGHT AROUND THE WORLD FOR EVER.

The rhythmic pulse of the universe: it may be wise to have a moment of silence here, and perhaps to listen to the passage again.

On another occasion, would it be appropriate to listen to a selection from Holst's 'The Planets' while thinking meditatively of the grand scheme of the universe? These things are beyond words and merely rational understanding: we could try to approach them with other faculties.

The line 'Ebb and flow of day and night around the world for ever' is from Clifford Bax's poem 'The meaning of Man', which is included in The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse.

*** ... MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN BY JUST READING ABOUT IT.

Discuss examples. As it is not always easy to find examples on the spur of the moment, members may be asked to try to bring others for discussion at a subsequent meeting.

18. Third Proposition: Preliminary reading.

*** ... FOUR LINES MAKING THE THIRD SENTENCE.

19. Third Proposition: Vocabulary.

*** ... BEFORE GOING ON TO THE SECOND STAGE.

As indicated on the tape, it is best to keep mainly to a study of words and phrases, but inevitably some discussion of the meaning of the passage as a whole will arise. This further study will be continued in the next part of the work.

20. Third Proposition: First Sentence.

*** ... WITH THE SUGGESTIONS ON THE TAPE.

A simple sentence is a sentence containing only one verb. So far as possible, each fact or idea needs to be extracted and set down separately, as was done with the First Proposition.

After doing this work with the first sentence, as far as 'during the whole term', continue with the tape.

21. Third Proposition: First sentence: Review.

Here again it will be best to stop at each of the principal ideas contained in the first sentence, and then to play through the whole passage again at the end.

The suggested stopping places are:

*** ... IS OURSELVES, AND WE ARE IT.

Pause for a moment in silence, then invite comment on this passage.

*** ... NOT IT IN ITS FULLNESS BUT AN ASPECT OF IT.

Refer to Students' Notes.

*** ... WHO, OR WHAT, OBLIGES IT?

Important discussion. Wait until members have contributed their own ideas before referring to The Divine Plan.

*** ... TO THE END OF THE PARAGRAPH. READ IT NOW.

*** ... IF THE FIRST IS TRUE, THE THIRD MUST FOLLOW.

*** ... IN SPITE OF ALL FRUSTRATION AND DIFFICULTY.

22. Third Proposition: Second sentence.

*** ... REVIEW THE WORK TOGETHER.

The length and complexity of this sentence makes it more difficult to simplify. It is almost always helpful to think of this kind of work as an exercise in communication, as has been done previously. We have to convey to another person all that is contained here. It does not matter how many short sentences are made from the original one, nor how much repetition of words or phrases is found necessary: the aim is to unravel the intricacies of language in order to set out as clearly as possible every idea or item of information.

23. Third Proposition: Second sentence: Review.

This passage divides into three sections, each of which will require discussion and reference to the Students' Notes. The stopping points are:

*** ... IT WOULD BE IDLE TO SPECULATE.

*** ... WE COULD CALL IT THE PHASE OF YOGA PRACTICE.

*** ... THE WHOLE RANGE OF THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS.

24. Third Proposition: Third Sentence.

*** ... DISCUSS THE THIRD SENTENCE NOW.

The same kind of analysis and simplification needs to be done with this last sentence as with the rest.

25. Third Proposition: Third sentence: Review.

*** ... MAY HELP THE DISCUSSION AT THIS POINT.

N.B. The concluding phrase of this next section is repeated. Do not stop the tape until you hear it for the second time:

*** ... WE ARE THAT, BECOMING CONSCIOUS OF ITSELF.

A pause to reflect on this tremendous idea is recommended, before reviewing the proposition as a whole. A replay of the tape, from section 21 to where we are now, will probably help to co-ordinate the work and show the panorama of ideas as a whole.

26. Conclusion

This is the last section of the tape. Let a moment of silence elapse before discussing the questions asked.

*** ... SEEK OUT HIM WHO KNOWS STILL LESS THAN THOU.

* * * * *

